On Interdisciplinary Embraces in Game Studies

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ABSTRACT

That game studies is an interdisciplinary venture is often stated and yet contested. Indeed, the Nordic DiGRA 2023 Conference was held under the theme: Interdisciplinary Embraces. In this editorial to the conference special issues we delve into the history of game studies as interdisciplinary. Through interviews with some key researchers from the Nordic Region (Annika Waern, Espen Aarseth, Frans Mäyrä, Jesper Juul), we explore some meanings and implications of the interdisciplinarity nature of game studies. We suggest that the success of game studies as a "project" lies in its ability to bring together disparate traditions in interdisciplinary efforts while simultaneously building up a core. Game studies today both is and is not interdisciplinary through a disciplinary gravitational core and an interdisciplinary cloud surrounding it.

Introduction

It is often stated that game studies–the study of games as a field of its own–is an interdisciplinary venture (e.g. Deterding, 2017; Mäyrä, 2009; Stenros and Kultima, 2018). Game studies is a meeting between academic subjects in the same way that games themselves are a meeting between a wide range of disciplines (Mäyrä 2009), from engineering and programming to art and storytelling. Yet interdisciplinarity is far from one coherent thing (Light and Adams 2017). What does it mean for a subject such as game studies to be interdisciplinary? And what does it imply in practice? The Nordic DiGRA conference in 2023 was organised under the subtitle "Interdisciplinary Embraces". In this editorial to the conference's special issue, we attempt to chart out some of the current views on the nature of game studies as interdisciplinary, connect it to the emergence of game studies as a distinct field, and further discuss how this mattered for us in organising a conference as well as this special issue. We conclude by suggesting how we can think about game studies as both being and not being an interdisciplinary field. To assist us, we have asked a few questions to four well-known game studies scholars who were there from the beginning in the Nordic Region: Annika Waern from Uppsala University in Sweden, Espen Aarseth from the IT University in Denmark, Frans Mäyrä from Tampere University in Finland, and Jesper Juul from the The Royal Danish Academy in Denmark. They were generous enough to reply to our questions.

In this text, we will first speak briefly about interdisciplinarity and its relation to the study of games, using the term game studies quite inclusively. We draw on both previous literature as well as interviews with seasoned scholars' experiences. We then discuss what interdisciplinarity meant at the 2023 Nordic DiGRA conference before detailing the articles included in this special issue. Finally, we will close with a few words on why we argue that interdisciplinarity matters for the study of games.

INTERDISCIPLINARITY IN GAME STUDIES

While studies of games can be traced back to the late 19th century (Stenros and Kultima, 2018), and several of the texts that form part of game studies' canon are from the mid-20th century, it can be argued that game studies as a distinct phenomenon and academic endeavour did not emerge until the very early 2000s. From its outset, it has been suggested that games, as distinct objects of academic study, need to be approached from multiple angles and that no single traditional discipline (even what that means is contentious) would be able to capture the broad spectrum of what games are and what they mean (Mäyrä, 2009). Games are multi-layered systems that mix many modes of signification and interaction, affording a mix of theoretical and methodological inputs for research (ibid.). Thus, game studies as a field rose from many disciplines coming together.

Despite the many nodes making up the network of game studies research, Jesper Juul details the importance of converging as a field for motivating your work in this description of early game studies:

"[We realized] that there were other researchers around the Nordic countries who were working with the same questions, and we were strategic about making conferences and using the then-newfangled internet to create a distributed community through blogs and mailing lists. In practice, it was the adjacency of video games to technology that then allowed us to get our first jobs at technical institutions."

So, while interdisciplinarity was integral in the establishment of game studies as scholars from various home fields came together it was not a process without friction. According to Deterding (2017), game studies followed a broad developmental path seen in many interdisciplinary endeavours. Roughly, this path is one where a societal phenomenon is identified as important and something that straddles traditional disciplinary boundaries. Interdisciplinary effort is seen as promising for the development of new knowledge in the field, and this area of study can

sometimes emerge as a new field with journals, conferences, and institutional support. As game studies began to form, with conferences and journals, interdisciplinarity was seen as needed. Jesper Juul continues, by pointing out the importance of game studies becoming its own field:

> "This was prior to the emergence of mechanistic journal rankings, so the existence of journals and conferences allowed us to explain to our departments and PhD supervisors that what we were doing was valuable, and it was important to have an audience to write for, an audience that did not require that every paper started with a defense of studying video games. It is impossible to imagine doing the work without that community."

This idea is reiterated by Frans Mäyrä:

> "The wider field where Game Studies operates is indeed very interdisciplinary in contemporary academia. However, Game Studies also needs to be "disciplinary", in order to get funding, recognition and to even continue existing as a discipline with its own concepts, courses, degree programs, journals, associations and conferences."

In 2024 there are indeed journals, institutions, doctoral programs, and scholars who share an affiliation with game studies as a distinct discipline, and in this sense, game studies can be said to have a core set of recognizable features. Yet, this field, and many of the people working in it, stand in an uneasy relationship with the gravitational pull of more established disciplines, where funding, employment, and recognition might be more easily obtained (Deterding, 2017). Deterding further points out that positioning game studies as interdisciplinary, is a core identifier of game studies research. As mentioned, a central part of this is the claim
that games are complex and cultural phenomena that require the integration of several disciplines to make sense of them, as well as packaging this knowledge into the somewhat coherent field of game

studies. This synergy can also be seen in our interview with Annika Waern, where she describes her entry into game studies:

> "Coming from the Computer Science field, game studies opened new perspectives towards the humanities. But primarily, Nordic game studies was the only context where I found scholarly knowledge that included a deep understanding of games and computer games. Knowledge that was in synergy but also in contrast with how games were understood in industry and fandom. I think that this remains a unique quality of games studies: that it is in dialogue with the professional understanding of games and game design."

Several previous studies have pointed out that games cannot be narrowly contained within a single discipline, being sociotechnical assemblages (Consalvo, 2009; Taylor 2009; Prax et al. 2019). Yet, this breadth can be difficult in practice. "Disciplines have survived for so long in the academic world in part because they serve the very useful function of constraining what the researcher has to think about." (Lyall, Bruce, Tait and Meagher, 2011, p 95). This interdisciplinarity is simultaneously seen as both a strength and a weakness for games studies, where synergistic effects from different backgrounds, traditions, and perspectives allow unique knowledge development, while still being the source of contention, strife, and conflict. The excerpts from the interviews show this draw towards disciplinary self-sufficiency, identity, and community. Mäyrä (2009) concludes that game studies, to participate in interdisciplinary dialogues as a viable partner, need to develop a stable knowledge base and identity of its own to form a common ground for a scholarly community. As such, the identity of game studies can both be said to coalesce around common points of reference, while simultaneously finding new nodes in a widening network of research. Game studies may be established as its own centre of gravity in some sense, but it continues to feel both outward pressure from its researchers in finding new avenues for scholarly work, as well as the pull from other disciplines taking

further interest in games as objects for a much wider variety of research.

In conclusion, the field of game studies both is and is not interdisciplinary. It has become something more than the separate fields and domains that went into it, yet it still relies on the participation of researchers, methods, and theories from other fields. Maybe this is what truly defines game studies. Others have argued that it is only in truly interdisciplinary meetings, such as those of game studies, that groundbreaking research can emerge. Interdisciplinarity can be seen as a journey into the unknown, with no maps to guide you (Lyall et al. 2011). To us, personally, game studies often feels like such a journey into the unknown.

Here be dragons!

NORDIC DIGRA

The 2023 Nordic DiGRA theme was interdisciplinary embraces. We chose this theme as we agree with the idea of game studies being a field that is fundamentally interdisciplinary, and that it thrives in and grows out of academic differences. It is a place where we embrace and grow with our different perspectives, theories, and methods, and we do it together. But embraces are also about being physically close, about our embodied selves and the renewed opportunity of proximity and togetherness after the social distancing imperatives of the pandemic.

For us organisers, the first Nordic DiGRA Conference in Stockholm in 2010 was our first DiGRA conference, and even one of our first, academic conferences. We were all young PhD candidates, engaged in doctoral studies in different fields–sociology, human-computer interaction, and child studies. Even though it was by no means the first DiGRA conference, it represents a period where not only our own academic pursuits were formed, but one in which game studies showed its development. That conference played a part, as did the ones that have been organised since (in Visby, Tampere, and Bergen) in the emergence of game studies as both a global and a local

field. And as with us, many who made the journey into game studies did so from other fields. This is different from today when there are departments and PhD programs in game research, and indeed many authors of this special issue have their PhDs in game studies. Yet, there are many scholars in the field with one foot in game studies and one foot in various other disciplines. For us, coming to Nordic DiGRA all those years ago was a little bit like coming home, finding a group of researchers that were familiar with games and gaming as the core phenomena for research, where it was possible to lay domain-specific explanations to the side and focus on the core of the scholarly work. Finding a research community in which games were front and centre felt, as we believe it did for many at that time, as a relief. We did not have to defend that we were studying games, but could instead focus on the real questions we were interested in. Or, as Jesper Juul puts it in our interview: "It was a feeling of 'coming home', but also building the home."

This does not mean that the journey to establish game studies as a field was an easy one. If game studies were constructed as a home discipline for many researchers, there were, and continue to be, areas of contention related to the interdisciplinarity of the field. For example, Annika Waern points to how different publishing traditions between subjects have been adapted for:

> "The differences in scholarly traditions were also difficult to bridge. Early on, Nordic game studies met a challenge in the differences between publication traditions between the humanities and the more technical computer science traditions. This affected in particular how papers were submitted and accepted to conferences. Between years, this would shift back and forth between very exclusive acceptance based on peer review and full papers, and broad acceptance based on abstracts. Neither approach worked very well. Today, we have a number of well-established journals in the area that can serve as a bridge."

The way academia is structured into distinct subjects with their conferences, publication venues, departments, career steps, and so on, makes an interdisciplinary journey a difficult one, as detailed above. With this in mind, we spent much time considering what form the publications of the conference should take. We settled on abstract submissions and full journal papers as a subsequent submission.

In game studies we come together due to our joint, in-depth passion to understand what games are, what makes people play them, how we make them, and everything around them. This shared focus is the first of our many strengths as a field. Despite these similarities, we are all different. In this special issue, we have authors from a diverse set of subjects and academic affiliations. There are theoretical articles and methodological ones. Those that present in-depth case studies from game education or industry. They all come with different methodological toolboxes and various theoretical perspectives, as in game studies at large. These make us ask different questions and focus on different answers. This is our second core strength, this breadth of perspectives which has enriched and made our field grow into something substantial. To further this, we choose to be as inclusive as possible when considering presentations at the conference. We included, rather than excluded. Our reasoning was simply that if someone believes that what they do is game studies or games research, then we should hear them out. While there are certainly limits to what can be recognized as game studies we believe those boundaries should be poked, tested, and permeated. As Espen highlighted:

> "Games are the perfect interdisciplinary object. At the pre-DiGRA conference in Tampere in 2002, I rhetorically asked the audience which university discipline could not be used in game studies. No response. Odontology, I suggested. But of course, there was a dentist in the audience who objected."

That does not mean that interdisciplinarity is easy to reach nor

does not come for free. We are sure most of us have been in conference panels and presentations where people judge the quality of work based on values from subjects not compatible with the work being presented. We have to learn and understand various academic disciplines to be able to build on and engage with research from other paradigms, and sometimes that research is done with ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies that differ wildly from our own training, beliefs, and values.

On the question of interdisciplinary embraces, Espen Aarseth said:

> "It means to have faith in the potential of working across disciplines. It is sometimes hard, and there is never much money in it, so having faith is essential. And trust. And luck. Those are the three chief weapons of interdisciplinarity."

As Aarseth argues, faith, trust, and luck are key to successful interdisciplinarity. We argue that this can be done in practice through small but important means to support interdisciplinary embraces and constructive debate rather than destructive. At the conference, we worked with the key values of respect and kindness. We argue that it is in the small details we set norms and standards for meetings. So we urged seniors to interact with younger scholars, and we reinforced the DiGRA code of conduct, which wonderful people in the international DiGRA have spent time and energy on defining. We also engaged a safety officer to make sure the social climate would be something we would be proud of. We come together in conferences such as these to debate and discuss research and embracing interdisciplinary, for us, is also about respecting differences or acknowledging that we are different, but that this difference is what makes us strong. Yet it requires kindness and an open mind. Trust, as stated above, can be considered a central aspect of the community, fundamental to our capacity to have constructive meetings and dialogue across divisions.

We have to continue to protect the strengths of our field. Our interdisciplinarity is one of these strengths but it requires humility, kindness, and an understanding of one's academic pre- conceptions. That way we can all be part of advancing the field of game studies and continue to make this the inclusive and welcoming field it was for us when we took our first stumbling steps out in academia.

"[A]t the crux of good interdisciplinary research lies not a shallow knowledge of myriad topics but a detailed understanding of how to make different forms of knowledge work together synergistically." (Lyall 2019, p 66)

How we go forward is an open question. On one side we see more calls for interdisciplinarity that is constructive to all, as Lyall et al. (2019) argue in the quote above. Yet increased focus on quantity over quality in scholarship metrics and focus on specific publication venues in certain fields makes it hard to enact in practice. Older, better-established and funded disciplines draw people in and may lead to researchers leaving game studies behind (see Deterding, 2017). As we have discussed here, game studies is both its own field and an interdisciplinary research arena. Nick Taylor, our senior keynote speaker at the conference, suggests one way forward in the post-script to this special issue where he writes on post-disciplinary postures (2024).

Ultimately, if the interdisciplinary project of game studies is to persist, it needs to show its scholarly and societal utility–taken in the broad sense of the word. While we certainly see the upsides of multiple perspectives on games as a phenomenon, it is up to the researchers within this sprawling field to deliver knowledge, insights, and discoveries that cannot be obtained in purely disciplinary settings. This also means that game studies needs to be open to new influences, allowing formulation of novel research problems that might not fit our current formulation of what game studies is, and what it is not. Self-professed members of the game studies collective might be served with reflecting on practices of inclusion, exclusion, and selection.

THE PAPERS

The Uppsala Nordic DiGRA was the largest so far, with 37 presentations plus panels and workshops with almost a hundred participants and representations from all Nordic countries, Denmark, Finland, Norwegian, Sweden, and Iceland. We also had submissions and participants from several counties outside the region. In our interviews, both Espen Aarseth and Frans Mäyrä reinforced that Nordic DiGRA was never without its strong international connection and the field, both regional and international emerged together, something we see in the conference itself.

The high number of participants for a local conference spoke to a need to meet and be physically close in this post-pandemic world we live in. Perhaps, it also spoke to changed habits due to increased climate strains where local conferences will gain in importance as we strive to reduce our climate impact. Meeting is still key for research such as ours, particularly in an interdisciplinary field we need time to misunderstand each other as some have argued (slow-science.org, Berg and Seeber 2016).

This double special issue contains thirteen original studies, this editorial, and a final post-script. All authors who were accepted to present at the conference were offered the chance to submit to the special issue. The submitted manuscripts then went through an additional standard review process with two reviewers. Final papers were selected based on the outcome of this process.

Our papers in themselves are an interdisciplinary mix. They come from a wide range of scholars, active in various departments and subjects. They also enact interdisciplinarity in their subject matter, from looking at or introducing theory or methods from other fields into game studies to studying the making of games and game education to paying attention to the culture around games, rather than games themselves. The issue itself then represents the interdisciplinarity of game studies, while also showing that there are theories and methods that join us together into a field of its own with a strong core identity.

The first issue (Volume 6, Issue 3) begins with theoretically oriented studies which either introduce theory into game studies or studies the process of play. The issue also contains studies which move outside of the games themselves with attention to para-text and context of play.

Marie Dalby's article on "Orientations in Queer Game Studies" begins our double issue. In an on-point analysis Dalby charts the beginning of Queer game studies and explores how a movement away from traditional representation studies in favour of increased attention to materiality, as well as a movement both to and away from fun, can be said to define the emergence of this sub-field within game studies.

Dom Ford's article "Approaching FromSoftware's Souls Games as Myth" explores how a mythological take on FromSoftware's five Souls games can shed light on the commonalities of the worlds and stories told in these games. Finally, Ford links this to the work of the wider community around these games.

In the article "Character-Driven Narratives in D&D5E and Fate: Core System", Joy Kumral and Luis F.T. Meza explore how the rules for character creation in tabletop roleplaying games can take a more active, or passive, role in affecting the narratives being played out, using the two games *Fate: Core System*, and *Dungeons and Dragons* as two opposing examples.

In Nathalie Schäfer's article "1001 Followers in 20 Day: Framing The Playful Use of Fame-Enhancing Bots on Instagram" we see another approach to interdisciplinarity, where the use of bots in Instagram is studied through the lens of transgressive play and cheating. By treating the activity as a playful use of a system, rather than just breaking of the terms of service, a deeper understanding of botting can be gained.

Kati Alha explores gender stereotypes in mobile games in her article "Endure, Join them or Leave? Suffering Women in Mobile Game Advertising". In advertisements for two such games, she finds that women are represented through well-known and absurdly exag-

gerated stereotypes, in need of rescue by the player. The advertisements, however, put the (implied) female player in a position of control and power, providing a counterpoint to the narrative of the game.

In "Gamemasters of the Playground: Exploring Children's Leadership Roles when Programming Hybrid Digital-Physical Outdoor Playground Equipment", Andreas Bergqvist and Jon Back examine children's social dynamics when interacting in and around programmable features of an outdoor playground. Through a thematic analysis, they find that the programmable prototype provides for an emergent game master role, where a child becomes an informal leader of the group, supporting and guiding others in digital-physical play. The authors suggest that this role could be considered in design.

The second issue (Volume 7, Issue 1) contains studies related to teaching game design as well as studies related to the workings of the game industry and political contexts for game development.

Louise Persson and Rebecka Rouse in their piece, "The Game Weavers: A Feminist Approach to Game Writing", explore how a changed approach to how we think about game writing as wearing can spur creativity and increase a sense of identity in a game writing education.

Holger Pötzsch, Therese H. Hansen, Emil L. Hammar and Tobias

B. Staaby's contribution, "Putting the Cybermedia Model into Educational Practice: Expanding the Framework", develops a toolset for educators engaged in using digital games in classroom teaching. This framework provides a set of critical questions both for teaching with and teaching about games, concerning both its sign system and game mechanics, as well as the institutional context in which the game is going to be used, the players using it, as well as the material circumstances of the game's production.

Solip Park studies immigrant/expatriate game developers in Finland. Their article "Embracing Global and Local: How Game Industry Expatriates Work Between Global and Local Game Devel-

opment practices", looks at motivations to expatriate, as well as calls for efforts to encourage cultural competence and tolerance to nurture sustainability and inclusivity in the system.

Mark Staun Poulsen and Hanna Wirman report on an ethnographic field study of a development team in an indie game company in the article "Creative-Rational Tensions in Game Development: A Danish Case Study on Team Collaboration", focusing on collaborative game-making.

Kamiab Ghorbanpour and Patrick Prax study Iranian video games and their relation to nationalism in the article "Seyyed of Cyrus the Great: Iran's Confused Nationalism" in Games, focusing on governmental authority and the role of independent game developers.

In "Noita -A Long Journey of a Game Idea", Annakaisa Kultima, Riina Ojanen and Niklas Nylund trace the development of a Finish indie game over a decades-long period. Their timeline method is shown to be useful both as a representation of complex development processes but is also suggested to be a critical research method.

Our final article is "Zinecraft: Zines as Companion to Games and Research" by Hailey Austin and Mirjam Palosaari Eladhari. The two authors hosted the final event of the conference: a Zinemaking workshop. Through it, and in the article here, they demonstrate how researchers and others working with games can draw on zinemaking as a creative practice to further meta-reflections and stop and think about what they are doing. It is a fitting conclusion to our double issue.

FINAL WORDS

As an interdisciplinary field, game studies draws its roots from a vast network of interconnected traditions, paradigms, methodologies, and theoretical foundations. These intricate connections extend to institutional and personal interweavings, highlighting the complexity and richness of the field. The cultural significance of digital, and non-digital games is paramount, with research permeating various disci-

plines and locations, a reality eloquently portrayed in this special issue.

As Jesper Juul told us:

> "All disciplines probably have a touch of superiority complex, with a hint of believing that all other disciplines are wrong/naive/problematic. To do an interdisciplinary embrace means to accept that others can see or say things that you cannot say yourself."

This balance between inclusion, fragmentation, and isolation is a contentious part of game studies. Openness and inclusion have to compete with the need for community, and identity preservation as the development of disciplinary theory, methods, and canonical studies. At Nordic DiGRA we embraced the breadth of game studies, as exemplified in the articles of this special issue. Yet, that is not to say that we were able to cover the breadth of the field: significantly more technically oriented research is missing. The sometimes uneasy division between technical subjects and more humanities and social science studies is an issue for the coherence of the field (Warpefelt, 2022). Still, other venues for game studies research may take different routes focusing more narrowly on research at the core of games studies, and we recognize that there is a need for both broad and narrow approaches.

In this text, we have highlighted the interdisciplinarity of game studies. Yet, As Nick Taylor (2024) eloquently explores in the postscript to this special issue, interdisciplinary has its problems and implies a constant move by scholars back to their respective disciplines. As we have discussed in this editorial, game studies is both an interdisciplinary meeting, but also has a core that today is a discipline in its own right. This could be something that we can relate to what Taylor calls postdisciplinarity (2024). We argue, that we can understand game studies as a gravitational centre consisting of theories and methods, as well as academic places and people, with a large nebulous cloud of interdisciplinary thoughts, people, and institutions surrounding it. This cloud is ever-shifting and evolving, the centre

gives it focus and stability but also takes inspiration from and is changed by external input. This thought is mirrored in what Annika Waern said:

> "It is important that game studies scholars accept that good research on games ALSO can be done within related disciplines such as e.g. psychology or media studies, and vice versa: scholars in disciplinary subjects must learn to accept that the interdisciplinary approach also is academically valid and worthwhile."

Here we could also return to Aarseth's previous comment on trust. It takes great trust to live in the uncertainty of such a state of the field. To continue to resist stability in favour of the nebulous. As Taylor argues, "postdisciplinarity as an active and aspirational process rather than a state: as a posture, one that may be difficult to hold for sustained periods of time as the gravitational pull of disciplinary structures (such as expectations for tenure and promotion) wax and wane".

Looking ahead, we believe that the field of game studies will need to maintain its interdisciplinary roots while demonstrating its scholarly and societal utility. Having a centre, and relishing in the uncertainty of allowing other fields and disciplines in. To remain open to new influences, continually pushing the boundaries of what game studies can encompass, while at the same time maintaining a sense of a common focus, we argue is a constructive way forward that builds on the past accomplishments of the field. Creating fruitful interdisciplinary conversations does not happen spontaneously. It necessitates the establishment of suitable, open, and inviting environments. Crafting these conducive spaces is a shared responsibility, fostering a culture where diverse perspectives can coexist.

The success of game studies as a "project" lies in its ability to bring together disparate traditions in interdisciplinary efforts while simultaneously building up a core. This collaborative approach has not only led to theoretical and methodological advancements but has also laid the groundwork for the establishment of education in game

design. If game studies as an interdisciplinary effort is to remain relevant, delivering new insights and knowledge regarding games and play, it must continue to be dynamic, adapting to new technological, societal, and scientific challenges. To keep its centre, while nurturing its cloud.

As you delve into this special issue, we invite you to explore the diverse and evolving landscape of game studies. We hope that the insights shared within these pages contribute to the ongoing dialogue in this interdisciplinary field.

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